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Marco Polo: Pioneer of East-West Communication, Transportation and Trade

Chien Wen Yu

D*escription of the World* or, more commonly, *The Travels of Marco Polo* was the most influential travelogue concerning China in the thirteenth century. Today, there exist more than 130 versions of the book. Though scholars have examined many aspects of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, few have studied closely what it tells us about the origins of East-West communication and culture. *The Travels* is a popular text in China, but it is controversial in the West. Though many skeptics question the authenticity of Polo's account, the work that scholars (members of my family and myself included) have done over many years translating and writing about Marco Polo proves that his coming to China contributed greatly to the advance of East-West communication, cultural exchange, transportation, and trade.

The Life of Marco Polo and His Journey to China

Marco Polo was born to a merchant family on the Venetian island of Curzola (present-day Korcula, Croatia) in 1254. When he was six years old, his father (Niccolo Polo) and his uncle (Maffeo Polo) made their first trip to China. When Marco was 17, Nicolo and Maffeo took him with them on their second trip to China. From Venice, they entered the Mediterranean Sea, crossed the Black Sea, and arrived in the ancient city of Baghdad in the Middle East. There they were robbed by pirates, which dissuaded them from travelling any further by sea. Instead, they took a land route to China. Riding on horseback, they overcame obstacles and went over the Pamir Mountains passing through Armenia, Persia and



Marco Polo (1254-1324). Engraving by Gaetano Bonutti after a painting by the Venetian School. (Photo credit: Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Afghanistan, before they arrived in the empire of the Mongol Great Khan. In May 1275, Kublai Khan invited the Polos to his residence where they presented him the privileges and letters that the Pope of Rome had sent. Great

Khan was very pleased with the holy oil that they had brought. In 1277, Marco Polo was appointed an official of the Privy Council by Kublai Khan and served as a tax inspector for three years in the City of Yangzhou.

Staying and doing business in Mongol Empire for 17 years, the Polos acquired a wealth of jewels and gold, but they were anxious to go home. Kublai reluctantly let them go in return for escorting Mongol princess Kokachin so that she could marry the Persian prince, Arghun. The sea journey took two years; they passed through the South China Sea to Sumatra and crossed the Indian Ocean for a final landing in Hormuz. The Polos arrived back in Venice in 1295 by way of Persia, Constantinople and the Black Sea.

The Travels of Marco Polo and Controversies

The Travels of Marco Polo is a detailed account of his travels to China and neighboring countries in central, west and southeast Asia, using first-hand information. The book is of high academic and historical value since there were no annals in China to record the historical facts of that period. The document is divided into four volumes. The first volume provides an account of what the Polos saw and heard on their way to China. The second volume records the society of early Yuan Empire including political affairs, wars, secrets of the royal court, exotic customs, and economic prosperity of such cities as Dadu (Beijing), Shangdu (Zhangjiakou), and Xingzai (Hangzhou). The third volume depicts the conditions of the neighboring countries to the southeast of China. The final volume describes the wars between the Khans and the political situation in northern Asia. Of the four volumes, the second volume stands out because it is written from the perspective of Marco's personal experiences in China and it is considered by many to be the best part.

Today, there are two schools among the scholars of Marco Polo, and they have formed opposing views. One side, the Believers, affirm that Marco Polo went to China, while Skeptics doubt that he went. Supporters are represented by scholars such as Tübingen University professor Hans Ulrich Vogel, British diplomat and Polo biographer Maurice Collis, and Chinese scholars such as Zhijiu Yang and Shixiong Yu. Skeptics are represented by Frances Wood, Head of the Chinese Collection at the British Library, and Professor Craig Clunas from University of London. Best known for her book *Did Marco Polo Go to China?*, Wood argues that Marco Polo didn't, and that *The Travels* was merely a travel guide containing second-hand tales.



A page from *The Travels of Marco Polo* by Rustichello da Pisa and Marco Polo, c 1300
(Source: Wikipedia)

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In the fourteenth century, the book spread throughout Europe in manuscript form, popularly circulated and copied by hand. Two years after Marco Polo returned from China, a war started between the city states of Venice and Genoa. During the Battle of Curzola (1298), Marco Polo was captured and put into jail as a prisoner of war. He spent several months of his imprisonment dictating his travels to a fellow inmate and writer, Rustichello de Pisa. Interpreting Marco Polo's stories and incorporating his own ideas,

Rustichello wrote down only what he was interested in. And here is the root of the controversy.

The historical debate about the veracity of *The Travels* focuses on what is (or seems to some to be) missing from the book. Why does the book contain no references to quintessential Chinese cultural practices and symbols, such as foot-binding among Chinese women, the Great Wall, Chinese characters or chopsticks, or even Chinese tea? The answers to those questions are pretty

clear. For Marco Polo, the practice of foot-binding for women was rare, especially in the Mongol area. Mongol nomads practically lived on horseback; it would have been difficult for bound-foot women to function. The Great Wall was built in the Ming Dynasty after the Yuan Empire and Marco Polo's travels. A Venetian, Marco Polo did not know or learn any Chinese, nor did he know how to use Chinese writing brushes or chopsticks. Therefore, there was no mention of Chinese characters or chopsticks. Finally, the Mongols did not drink the regular Chinese tea, which is brewed from tea leaves, and so Chinese tea is, naturally, never mentioned. In short, skeptics' questions are easily answered and the believers' case is sustained.

Marco Polo's Stories and Contribution to East-West Communication and Culture

Marco Polo's description of Chinese food and drink still plays an important part in our understanding of the origins of East-West communication and cultural exchange. The foods he mentions include rice, noodles, the meat of birds, and the meat of domesticated and wild animals. In terms of drink, there is mare's (horse) milk, camel milk, grape wine and rice wine. Horse milk is a Mongolian drink that many claim tastes as good as wine. According to Marco Polo's account, the Great Khans raised thousands of white horses, and only Kublai Khan and his immediate family had the privilege of being served of this kind of drink. In addition to mare's milk, camel's milk was a favorite drink because it was reportedly tasty and good for promoting the health of the whole body and strengthening will power.

Polo also wrote about grape and wine production in Taiyuan of Shangxi. Wine was believed to stave off hunger

and promote health. As Marco Polo told it, in the Yuan Empire wine was to be used as the only offering made in imperial ancestral temples. In Qidan, he observed, residents drank a wine made of rice, spice and Chinese medicinal materials. In the Yuan Dynasty, Chinese medicinal materials were infused in distilled wine liquor to make Chinese Wolfberry Wine, *Radices Rehmanniae* Wine, Tiger Bone Wine and *Poria Cocos* Wine. The Chinese medicinal wines that spread to the West are still popular today. All of this can be attributed to Marco Polo. Finally, the eating of noodles was brought to the West by Polo. The extra thin noodles that came from China to Italy become famous in Venice as “Marco Polo Noodles.”

Marco Polo's Stories and Their Contribution to East-West Transportation

As Marco Polo described it, the Yuan Empire was a vast territory that was remarkably well connected. Across the Empire were hundreds of communications posts where horses and couriers were stationed. In all, about 200,000 horses were kept and a system of town-to-town messengers was put in place for this purpose. Some messengers traveled 250 or 300 miles in a day.



Sculpture of Marco Polo on campus of Beijing Foreign Studies University (Author's photo)



Lugou Bridge (also known as Marco Polo Bridge), built of stone with 24 arches and supported by 25 piers (Author's photo)

Marco Polo was impressed with the efficient transportation and communication system in the Mongol Empire.

The Travels of Marco Polo describes another important feature of east-west transportation: the world-famous Lugou Bridge (which Marco Polo called the Bridge of Pulisangan). Appointed by the Great Khan as his ambassador to the West, Marco left Khan-balik (Beijing), crossing the handsome bridge of stone built with 24 arches and 25 piers. Lugou Bridge was a strategic point of transportation, crossing as it did Polisangan River, which flowed into the ocean and was navigated by many vessels with considerable quantities of merchandise. Since Marco was the first westerner to cross the bridge and introduce the bridge to the West, many westerners call it “Marco Polo Bridge.”

The Travels of Marco Polo expanded the worldview of both his contemporaries and European explorers who came after his time. Some famous world maps were made using information provided by Marco Polo, and *The Travels of Marco Polo* contributed to the expansion of shipping ventures and business. After reading *The Travels*, Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama (1460–1524) and Italian mariner Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) each became interested in the East, envisioned Chinese prosperity and civilization, and explored the East in a way that promoted the East-West cultural exchange, transportation and trade.

The Polos were adventurous merchants from Venice and went to the East to seek spices, silk and jewelries. Marco Polo was drawn to the powerful Yuan Empire and the prosperity of its economy and trade. Regarding the monetary system, he gave a detailed account of paper money, its money circulation and manufacturing process.

Under the rule of the Yuan Empire, paper money was used by government officials and ordinary citizens. In Dadu, refusing to accept it as payment was punishable by death. Even the foreign merchants who came with silver, gold, precious stones and leather to the Yuan Empire had to accept the paper money and take it for payment. Despite this threat, the use of paper money for trade was recognized by many in Polo's time and since as so much more convenient and efficient than bartering with goods for goods. It signified the progress of the Yuan Empire, but it also reflects the acumen the Marco Polo possessed as a businessman and an objective observer, and a conduit for connecting ideas, practices and cultures of the East and the West.



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